Let Us Pray

March 17, 2024

My former wife was quite an interesting person. It is hard to explain exactly why, but one example is how she could pray the most self-centered prayers without hesitation.

When I was on a business trip to Thailand, news spread that a massive typhoon was about to strike northern Nagasaki Prefecture. It was broadcast repeatedly on TV, even in Thailand and Singapore, and my friends there prayed earnestly for us. At home, my wife too was praying seriously: *"Lord, please change the course of this typhoon."*

She never realized how self-centered this prayer was. Yet when I returned home, she happily reported to me that the typhoon had shifted slightly south and gone on to hit Kumamoto instead. She told me with relief, "See? The typhoon that was supposed to hit us veered away, and on Sunday Pastor Nagasawa came and we had such a wonderful worship service!"

I replied, pulling toiletries out of my suitcase, "Well, of course, Pastor Nagasawa is stylish and dandy." In fact, by then I had already heard directly from him on the phone. Because of that same typhoon, which had missed Nagasaki but struck Kumamoto, he had been blown ten meters while putting away a tent sheet for his child's excursion and had broken a rib. Yet he never showed any sign of pain, drove to Sasebo, and preached for us. I thought, "Truly, this is the pastor I respect."

My wife, cheerful and innocent like a little girl, knew none of this. Without the slightest sense of guilt, she even told Pastor Nagasawa, "I prayed for the typhoon not to hit Sasebo, and it went away!" He responded warmly, "That's one of your good points, Yoko-san," while I, gripping the receiver and bowing my head, apologized, "I'm so sorry."

As a pastor, I thought, "Why couldn't she have prayed, not 'change the course of the typhoon,' but 'please prevent damage from the typhoon'?" Yet even so, it was fine. God does not answer our prayers because they are wise. He listens not to the wording

but to the true intention behind them. Even mistaken or foolish prayers are heard for the sincerity within them.

If, long ago, God had answered Pastor Nagasawa's prayer literally and exactly as spoken, then we would never have witnessed him later, in front of his colleagues, shouting out without hesitation, "Aiko, I love you!"—and we would never have seen Mrs. Aiko, muttering, "Oh my, again, how shameless…" while at the same time clearly touched. If God had answered literally, their son, who later became a missionary to Mongolia, might never have been born. Every time I heard Pastor Nagasawa call out, "Aiko, I love you!" I also heard his unspoken heart: *"Aiko, thank you! I will hang on a little longer. You too, though it is hard, please endure with me a little longer."* Then I thought, "How good it was that God did not grant his youthful prayer." Sometimes, joking, I would say this loudly for all to hear, and he would laugh without shame, replying, "That's true." All his life, he had cared for his frail wife with much difficulty and devotion.

Both the woman Pastor Nagasawa had admired in his youth and his beloved wife Aiko have now gone on before him. By now, he must have met them again in the place beyond. Perhaps he is even apologizing: "I caused you so much trouble in the other world as well."

Prayer is not merely asking. Asking is included, but prayer is the communion of the heart with God. God rejoices in the trust of those who come to Him, and treasures the warmth of that relationship. At first, we may treat God as though He were a convenient bank that lends without interest, without limit, and without demanding repayment—pouring out selfish requests. Yet that is all right. It is from there that we begin to grow closer to God, to deepen trust, and to enter into rich fellowship with Him. That is what God desires. So let us stop criticizing the prayers of others—or even our own prayers.

God listens to our prayers—childish prayers, clumsy prayers, selfish prayers, even indiscriminate prayers. He does not dismiss them as bothersome but listens patiently, understanding their true intent, and answers in the best way. He responds to the heart behind our words, even when we do not understand what is truly best. In this way, He strengthens our faith.

So then—let us pray!

When we truly grow as Christians, we shift from living for ourselves to living for God, and then to living for the happiness of others. This is not only the teaching of Scripture but also the essence of our humanity, given when we were created in God’s image. The teaching of the Bible awakens, encourages, and strengthens this humanity. That is why even non-Christians, who sense an unseen presence, feel gratitude for life, and seek to use their lives for the happiness of others, can be found everywhere. Many such people live in Japanese society, making it outstanding in the world.

Christian growth means not merely relying on one’s own humanity but receiving fresh strength from the Creator of heaven and earth—the source of that humanity—so that our God-given nature may truly flourish.